Remembering Basil ("Chappy") Aboody (1923-2005)

(16th March 1923 – 21st January 2005)

Introduction

Chappy was undoubtedly my childhood hero, sponsor for my Confirmation, special invited speaker at my Ordination and at my parents’ Golden Jubilee (to mention just two of many occasions). Chappy was one of our family as much as we the Halls (who owned and operated the Wiangaree bakery 1948-1967) were particularly blessed to be counted among the Aboody extended family. Chappy bought me
my first surfboard and attempted (without much success) to teach me to fish and catch crabs. One of my favourite childhood memories

Chappy & Merle (middle) on their wedding day at Catholic Church, Kyogle, with Joe and Mary Hall (either side) Best Man & Matron of Honour

is Chappy driving us each year in his car to the Altar Boys’ Picnic at Evans Head. My parents Joe and Mary were honoured to be Best Man and Matron of Honour at Chappy’s & Merle’s Wedding some forty years ago. These are the kinds of friendships that last forever – in this world as surely as in the next.

I am especially indebted to Chappy’s daughters, Joan and Margaret, and to his sister Barbara and my father Joe (the Wiangaree baker 1947-1967) who assisted with the writing of the eulogy (given at the Requiem Mass for Chappy, Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church, Kyogle). My intention has been to capture something of the essence / truth of this wonderful person, Chappy Aboody who, in my reckoning, is without
peer. As his life was a gift and grace to so many others, may he now be gifted and graced with eternal peace and joy.

I feel especially privileged to be asked by the family to give the eulogy at Chappy’s Farewell from Our Lady of Sorrows Church, Kyogle.

Eulogy

Basil Aboody was delivered into the world by his grandmother – who acted as midwife – in the Terrania Street home in Lismore on 16th March 1923, the second child of Michael and Nancy Aboody-Zahloot whose families emigrated from Lebanon between the 1880s and early twentieth century. Named after the most famous saint of the early Eastern Church, Basil soon became Chappy, a name that seemed to fit. Chappy grew up in the Lismore-Ballina-Kyogle districts with his brother Greg and sisters Olga, Nezza, Regina “Bubsy” (now deceased), Barbara and Helen (deceased in Holy Week 2005). [Note: With the death of Barbara in 2017, all siblings are now deceased. RIP]

Chappy’s father, Mick, was an entrepreneur and, like most Aboody’s, a character. Mick had a horse and buggy for carting and selling merchandise and had shops at various times in Wiangaree, Lismore and Ballina. Chappy’s formal education at Wiangaree and Ballina Public
Schools and Marist Brothers in Lismore was a trial for both Chappy (who much preferred to spend his time fishing) and no doubt for his teachers. Despite this, Chappy continued the tradition of the Zahloot and Youhakim families of his parents with their love for books and their interest in history, culture, politics and religion.

At the outbreak of World War II, Chappy stretched the truth a little – not for the first or last time! – by convincing the recruiting officer he was of age to enter the army. Like so many soldiers, Chappy, not normally lost for words, did not speak much of his war-experience in Papua New Guinea – to which tribute will be paid by representatives of the RSL. He simply told me once that war is a terrible thing and that if politicians knew what it meant to send soldiers to war, they would most likely find a more suitable way for dealing with conflict.

After the War, Chappy returned to Wiangaree and the family store. These were Chappy’s famous, even infamous, bachelor days. Stories abound and everyone will have their own favourite Chappy stories! Some of these will be related to fishing trips! His sister Barbara has a photo to prove that Chappy caught the biggest fish ever caught on Ballina’s Shelley Beach. Chappy was also a great prankster. He once brought my mother a gift on St Patrick’s day – a live green tree snake in a hessian bag! Then there are the “going to Kyogle to get the ice for the dough” stories – which doubled for sessions at the pub. A variation on this theme was Chappy inventing the excuse of Father
Nichol or Father Butler needing a working bee at the Kyogle Church and asking my mother if Joe could come along to help out? “Of course, Chappy!” Several hours later!!!

There are other stories of the bachelor years: Chappy’s first experience in brewing beer in the shed (it is said that after tasting the first batch of beer from the “Wiangaree Brewing Company”, nobody turned up to work at the mill the following day); Chappy’s first vehicle, a truck called “Stingo” with hessian bags for doors and different-sized tyres on each wheel bought as a bargain; Chappy’s unofficial role as Wiangaree’s SP Bookie. The other side of Chappy was also evident in these years: he was the first to put his hand up to assist in any family, civic or church functions. He played an important role in rescuing people (including my grandparents) in the 1954 flood with the breaking of the banks of the Richmond River at Wiangaree and in the subsequent relocation of the Catholic Church (which took a hike a mile or two down the river at the time of the floods) to the security of the Wiangaree hill.

To everyone’s surprise, Chappy renounced the state of bachelorhood to marry the love of his life, Merle, on the 8th May 1965 here in this church. Marrying Merle gave Chappy an immediate introduction to parenthood which he readily accepted in his enduring commitment to be the father of Merle’s three children – John, Joan and Brian. And soon there were three more with the arrival of Nancy, Margaret and Michael who were unquestionably Chappy’s pride and joy. It seemed within a blinking of an eye, the one-time famous bachelor had become a cherished husband of Merle and father of six!
Merle and Chappy lived very happily in Wiangaree for a further 24 years, where they continued to run the Wiangaree emporium eventually incorporating a post office and acquiring a liquor license. Aboody’s store effectively became the museum honouring Wiangaree’s past with artifax from the butter factory, timber mill, blacksmith shop, bakery, butchery, railway station, churches and other things of historical interest. The store continued to serve the local community in good times and in bad, through times of flood, drought and when farmers fell on hard times. The store was also a welcome ‘outing’ for the many soldiers training in the Wiangaree State Forest during the years of the Vietnam War.

Chap’s personalised service included delivery of grocery orders neatly packed in boxes, a few surprise lollies for the kids and the occasional killing of snakes and other unwelcome wildlife for a farmer’s wife left on her own. Chap believed that this personalised service would always hold the business in good stead. When Jack the Slasher opened (and customers were tempted to take the trip to Lismore) Chappy had The Northern Star run an article advertising his excellent customer service and boasting of “5,000 acres of free parking”! I am told that, in this article, Chappy stated the store at Wiangaree was held up by bandits and that the Aboody family was Turkish! He was probably testing the editors to see if they would swallow everything they were told! And, to Chappy’s enjoyment, they did!
The Wiangaree store was the hub of the community and Chappy became universally and affectionately acclaimed “The Mayor of Wiangaree”. [This did him no harm on a trip to Sydney where “the mayor” was afforded special honours, graces and a free meal at the Canterbury-Bankstown Leagues Club!].

Back to the shop. As the locals know, you could buy anything at that shop – from a left-handed broad axe to pyjamas, a full dinner set, curtain materials, cosmetics, a carton of beer or your daily fruit and vegies. Of course, you could also catch up with the latest gossip and gain invaluable advice on any subject. Chappy was an expert on most things and, as his daughter Joan has so well expressed it: “When he didn't actually know what he was talking about he would make it up with such authority that you would believe him”! Chappy’s ability to tell tall
stories and his wonderful sense of humour never left him and endeared him to us all.

Chappy also became famous for his ‘store room parties’ and many people here have no doubt had the opportunity of attending one of these spontaneous gatherings “at the back of the shop after closing time”. Chap was known to scatter the crowd after a lengthy session when he would open a bottle of rum and throw the lid out the door with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Chappy’s generosity was part of his day to day life with discreet gifts of cash and groceries to those in need. This philosophy was extended into his retirement years with his work at St Vincent de Paul, right up until the time he became sick. Chappy was a person whose Catholic-Christian faith was not something he wore on his sleeve: he lived it in his heart and expressed it in his deeds, his moral fibre and the practical expressions of love and service to family, community and nation. He was always a generous contributor to others not excluding the Church and its missions. For example, he gave many days’ labour as well as direct financial assistance to transferring machines from the closing timber mill in Grevillia to the Marist missions in the Solomon Islands. Chappy was, of course, always a great contributor to any local civic cause. He was simply someone who got involved with anything worthwhile when he could make a contribution. And being everyone’s friend, he was often asked to do things for people which he did spontaneously and without question. He also used his humour and daring for good civic causes. As an example, I have this enduring image of Chappy and his good friend Matty Dougherty dressed up as Red Indians singing “On the Banks of the River” at the Kyogle Hall for a Fairymount Festival.
Chappy’s passing is a sad loss for Merle, his children, his extended family (including his nieces, nephews and their families for whom he had special regard), his dear friends and the entire community. One is inclined to say the likes of Chappy Aboody will not come again. He belongs to a generation of Australians with roots in other worlds and yet perfectly at home in this Australian soil which he loved and for which he fought – and about which he wrote poetry. On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Wiangaree Public School, Chappie wrote a special poem: “O fair Wiangaree, resting by those silent hills, where first your helmet greets the eastern sun . . . you have played your part in peace and war, your daughters and your sons have trod their path of duty rightly done.” Chappy, the reluctant scholar, was a reader and a poet. He wrote another poem celebrating Oliver Kissane’s “Pub of the Year” for which he was awarded a prize.

In the words of his daughter Margaret: “Dad was an outstanding father. He never said a harsh word and was always gentle and kind. I love him dearly and miss him terribly. He was a man of wisdom and vision. Life will be a challenge without him.”

Vale Chappy! You have inspired and cajoled us. You have made us laugh just as today your passing leads us to tears. You have taught us something important about celebrating the gift of life. You have been steadfast, strong and true – and as loyal as the day is long – to family, friends, and community. You were always larger than life. You were a still centre in a world moving too fast, a diamond stone among all life’s jewels. I am sure that even today the angels in heaven will be laughing at the tall stories you have to tell!

I would like to conclude with adapted words from Chappy’s own poem, his Ode to Wiangaree quoted above, but focusing now on Chappy
himself: “And now Chappy you are in another realm, but you may rest secure / Your mark upon family, friends, community, church and nation will endure”. Yes, you will be greatly missed, but you are with us in a new way, in God’s way, with Christ’s own promise of the Resurrection in which you believed and which we are all invited to share. We pray and look forward to meeting you again – to hear your voice and laugh again at your stories – at the heavenly banquet. Amen

Fr Gerard Hall SM

Ode to Wiangaree

Basil “Chappy” Aboody (1968)

O fair Wiangaree, resting by those silent hills,
Where first your Helmet greets the eastern sun
And up beyond a sombre Lion

10 Gerard Hall SM: Remembering Basil ("Chappy") Aboody
Guards you from the cyclone terror of the North,
And curbs his fury and his futile wrath,
And through your heart a tranquil Richmond flows,
Feeds the fields of sons who till and sow.

Fair cities in the South would be for nought
But for the likes of you who feed the teeming millions.
‘Though you number few,
O fair Wiangaree, you have played your part in peace and war,
Your daughters and your sons have trod their path of duty rightly done,
And now you are old, but may rest secure,
Your mark upon our nation will endure.

I am indebted to Chappy’s sister, Helen, who wrote this poem out for me. Chappy had written the poem for the Wiangaree Public School’s 60th Anniversary.

From my brief research, it does not seem to be on “the Web”. So now at least this version is!

Gerard Hall